

PATRIOTISM IN THE CINEMA HALLS!

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The ruling by the Supreme Court of India on 30 November 2016 is indeed an extraordinary and thought-provoking one. Accordingly, 'all cinemas in the country shall play national anthem prior to the screening of the film, with all doors closed'. The verdict is in line with Article 51 (a) of the Constitution, which affirms the 'duty of every citizen to abide by the Constitution by respecting its ideals and institutions, the national flag and the national anthem'. The judgment claims to be motivated by the objective of 'instilling love for the motherland, committed patriotism and nationalism as well as ruling out deliberate disrespect to the national symbols'.

Maharashtra, Chhatisgarh and Goa States have already made such a ruling mandatory under the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, which received a presidential assent on 23 December 1971. As a result of the recent enforcement of the mandate, 20 October 2016 witnessed in Goa a person viewing film on wheel chair being beaten up by certain vigilante fanatics for not standing up during the national anthem. Again, in 2014 in Mumbai a foreign lady was misbehaved with for a similar reason in a cinema house. Of course, such shocking aberrations of the mandatory implementation of the verdict are not intended by the Supreme Court.

Obviously, there is absolutely no scope for debating the intention or objective of the verdict of the esteemed judicial institution of our land that has pronounced signpost verdicts on diverse areas of life for putting social systems in place. But the current verdict, certainly smacks of a negative application of the Constitutional ideal of respect for the national symbols or patriotic feeling. Deliberate disrespect of the above ideal, without doubt, is a question of law and order and that has certainly to be exemplarily punished for. But, conducting lessons of patriotism or testing it in cinema halls appears to be not only superfluous but also defies all regular logic. Besides, the states that made such a provision mandatory have based themselves on prevention of insults to national honour. Does such an insult or its prevention make sense in the theatre? It is like 'searching for the lost key under the streetlamp, because the place where it was lost has no light!' Well, both instances, though well-intentioned, seem to be a misplaced measure!

As a matter of fact, people go to cinema halls for entertainment and not for learning lessons of patriotism or for making an exhibition of the same. And viewing film in the theatre is purely a question of personal choice. It is an individual or a family or friends affair. It is true that, along with advertisements, there could be some material of general nature on the screen for informing and instructing the public. For that matter, no doubt, there could also be a motivating strip for deepening the sense of patriotism. But making the national anthem mandatory before screening the film and forcing everyone including the disabled ones stand up in attention in the cinema hall is indeed a silly and an unnecessary decision. Intruding into the world of private entertainment with stringent mandates defeats all good sense and, I don't think, it is going to contribute to any patriotic feeling, worth the name!

It may be recalled that the Supreme Court had given a ruling in 1997, after the drastic fire that claimed some 60 lives at Uphar Cinema, that the 'doors of the theatre have to be kept open for the sake of free movement as well as of air circulation', lest people get suffocated, should there be an unforeseen tragedy. It is not difficult to see that the present ruling of the Supreme Court sharply contradicts the previous ruling and gives an impression of the lack of consistent logic in deliberations. Besides, handicapped persons deserve exemption and the ruling is insensitive to those unfortunate sisters and brothers of ours. In addition to addressing these and other contradictions and omissions, the Supreme Court has to reconsider the necessity, propriety and utility of the new ruling, in real and insightful terms. Trying to control the citizens and bothering them on certain whimsical non-issues, I think, challenges the privileged distinction of the topmost institution of justice in the country!

The implementation of the above ruling with its decorum intact, in all probability, goes beyond the capacity of the simple staff of the cinema hall. Suppose a few people do not stand up during the national anthem, I don't think, the one or two persons on the staff will be able to do anything and in the wake of some unforeseen causalities, all the more. Again, suppose, if certain vigilantes hooligans misbehave with someone or create disturbance in the hall, it will certainly be a matter of law and order. Naturally, in view of such a possibility, police force will have to be deployed. Is the government going to do that in the thousands and thousands of theatres of the country at all shows? It is viable? Even if the government may dare to do so, it may be also required that the police men and women on duty then are allowed to view the movie as a 'bonus' to performing the sacred duty of keeping the patriotic character of the hall undamaged. Well, I don't think, the Supreme Court has reflected over some of these consequential implications and the expediency of dealing with them!

Of late, the Indian air is highly polluted in terms of the confusion regarding who is a patriot and who a traitor. Those who conform themselves with a blind loyalty to certain communal, autocratic and power-mongering opinions and ways seem to be considered 'national' and those who voice their genuine and open opinions in tune with the Constitutional values are often interpreted as 'anti-national'. Certain fringe elements and misguided lunatics seem to boost up a simulated idea of patriotism and nationalism in view of commanding ground support, for their own reasons. Such vigilante extremists terrorize innocent people with their muscle power, in the pretext of food items, national symbols, religious rituals, and the like. In such a foul predicament, is not the Supreme Court giving an undeclared license to those hooligans to misbehave with fellow citizens, though unintentionally? From this angle, couldn't the present verdict be another chance for law and order problems in the country, especially in the sacred area of entertainment, fun, leisure and silent learning that cinemas are scheduled to offer?

It is true that there are lakhs and crores of cinema-goers in different languages spread over the landscape of India. As per the present ruling, when all of them display their patriotism before viewing film at every show and at every theatre, in all cities and towns, a considerable cross-section of the country will be full of the spirit of patriotism, amazingly so. In addition, the musical vibration of the spirit of patriotism inherent in the national anthem and the resonance of the same in the hearts of the citizens would fill almost the entire country in such way that India will prove to be an 'incredible country' of patriotism. I suppose, the concerned Judges of the Supreme Court must have visualized such an awesome outcome from the verdict. Or perhaps, it could simply an outcome of an innocent daydream, as well! It is also not impossible that the concerned Judges have come under the grip of the communal elements of the recent times. At any rate, are there not more serious problems in the country to be addressed? Shouldn't the esteemed Court of Law and Justice busy itself in assisting the common people of the country, who are desperately struggling to liberate themselves from the various Himalayan grass root concerns of discrimination, poverty, illiteracy, sickness, and the like?

Indisputably, Indian Judiciary deserves to be complimented for its judicial activism in the country in topical times, especially when the Executive and Legislature have been lagging behind or failing in their leadership by addressing the real problems of the country. Some of the landmark verdicts of the Supreme Court and also of some High Courts could be counted among pronouncements of world stature. I salute the respective courts and the concerned judges for those ground-breaking verdicts. But, my humble submission is that the current verdict of the Supreme Court in support of an exhibitionism of patriotism, that too, in the cinema halls, lowers the dignity of the utmost institution of justice as well as of the national anthem. The ruling requires to be regretted for exceeding the noble limits of patriotism and for making a mockery of national anthem, though not deliberately!

Now, suppose it is perfectly right to ensure that all the cinema halls of the country are intact with patriotic spirit, what about other public and private areas of the large country? If those multifarious areas are not taken care of, the 'patriotism of the cinema halls' will instantly evaporate and become ineffective. For instance, all the offices, governmental and non-governmental, should start with the national anthem. All factories, restaurants, shops, etc. have to fall in line. Every work, like cleaning, driving, typing, painting and studying, has to start with respect for the flag and the anthem. The day of every citizen has to start with a patriotic note. Wherever citizens gather, in markets

and all public places, national anthem has to be sung standing in impeccable posture. May be, patriotic rituals have to enter the bed rooms also! At any cost, I pray, going to the toilet be spared from this ruling, for heaven's sake! To say the least, I fail to understand why there is such an obsession with the cinema halls! Anyway, let us suppose, it is right that an exhibition of the patriotism and nationalism of the country has to permeate into all the details of the individual and social life of the country. If so, why not the Supreme Court, then the High Courts and all other Courts, start and end the court procedures with the national anthem? Then the governmental institutions, from top to bottom, should fall in line. I am sure, such a measure will display a more sensible logic of patriotism. Being a role model would do a better job in instilling true patriotic feeling in the citizens. After having bath, I suppose, the head need to be wiped first!

Patriotism, in fact, is a sacred sentiment that is innate to every citizen of the country. It has certainly to be duly expressed on national and official dates and occasions, time and again, to the visibility of all concerned. All individuals and institutions have to honour it scrupulously. But, it doesn't require to be displayed before every dick and harry and every now and then. No one has any business to demand others to exhibit it or claim to give a certificate of being national to anyone. A mania of showing off one's patriotism and nationalism, a craze for forcing others to demonstrate it, a vigilante contract of verifying it and using it as a tool for ulterior motives by anyone give the impression of a real deficit of the genuine spirit for the nation and its fellow citizens. Instead, the real spirit of patriotism has to be promoted, such as a sense of shared identity as Indians, a sense of belonging to each other, a sense of belonging together to the country and a sense of building a more harmonious nation, along with living the values of interaction, solidarity, equality, service, diversity, and the like. Perhaps, verdicts to this effect from elevated and esteemed sectors have to take shape, in favour of strengthening the ethical fibre of 'we the people' of the Constitution of India!

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